

# Social-insurance Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF)

## Writing Workshop

06/02/2023



Retirement & Disability  
Research Center

# Examples

## Example 1

Previous research does not provide a consistent magnitude for differences in substance use rates among sexual minorities and heterosexual individuals, however several studies have reported that substance abuse is more common among sexual minorities. In particular, Corliss et al. (2010) states that sexual minorities report higher levels of hazardous drinking during adolescence and this is especially pronounced among females. Moreover, the researchers also find that differences in drug use between sexual minority youth and heterosexual youth were larger during adolescents (12-17 years) than during early adulthood (18-23 years) (Corliss et al., 2010). This is a particularly influential finding indicating that sexual minority teenagers are more inclined to substance abuse than sexual minority adults, which in turn makes sexual minority teenagers an especially important segment of population for empirical work.

## Example 2

United States has the largest immigrant population in the world which represent a unique fusion of numerous cultures and experiences. Although the inflow of new immigrants over the last few years has been restrained by stricter immigration policies, the history of immigration in the United States still represents a considerable factor that greatly influences our present. In other words, the process of immigration and adjustment to new country does not only impact immigrants themselves, it also has spillover effects on native born population, since each immigrant community incorporates its cultural characteristics into various aspects of our everyday life.

## Example 3

Immigration has been a major source of debates in the United States. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) adds a new dimension to the immigration dispute, since it targets a particularly sensitive aspect of immigrant lives: family unity and children development. DACA is an immigration policy that allows children who were illegally brought to the United States to obtain a two-year renewable period of deferred action from deportation and permission to work. This program was one of the major legislative implementations for Barack Obama's administration, however attitude towards immigration has taken a sharp turn in the past few years and it is not clear if DACA will survive recent immigration reforms. Consequently, it is especially important to examine the impact of DACA on immigrant youth.

The Truth: Writing is Hard!

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Make realistic plans



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Make realistic plans
- Adopt an optimal strategy for yourself  
Get up and start working for 3-4 hours without internet access to get done a lot (most importantly unpleasant things)

# Writing Tips

# Writing Tips from Deirdre McCloskey

- BE CLEAR
- Speak to an audience of human beings
- Use your ear
- Paragraphs should have points
- Footnotes are nests for pedants
- Make your writing cohere
- Use active verbs: Never use the passive where you can use the active
- Never use a long word where a short one will do
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out

# Examples of Bad Words

## **Pointless adjectives**

- “former... latter”; “the above”; “the preceeding”  
Never request the reader to look back, because they will, and will lose their place
- “interesting”  
Overused by people who have nothing to say

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- “very”: The very general rule is to think very hard before using “very” very much, and to very often strike it out

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An idiotic phrase, when you think about it. All writing should be for convenience. What would be the point of writing for inconvenience?

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An idiotic phrase, when you think about it. All writing should be for convenience. What would be the point of writing for inconvenience?
- “kind of”; “sort of”; “type of”: vague, vague, vague
- “time frame” means “time”  
It originates in the engineer’s dim notion that “time” means “passage of time” alone, and not segments of time. But the notion is false. “This point in time” is the correlate phrase

# More Examples

## Example 1 Version A

Immigrant children represent a significant share of the U.S. population. According to the American Community Survey, 25 percent of all children in the U.S. were either foreign-born or resided with at least one foreign-born parent as of 2019. The place of birth and age at immigration have important implications. Immigrant children are often educationally disadvantaged compared to their native-born peers, which can have a strong impact on adult outcomes.



## Example 1 Version B

Immigrant children are an important part of the U.S. society. According to the American Community Survey, 25 percent of all children in the U.S. were either foreign-born or resided with at least one foreign-born parent as of 2019. The place of birth and age at immigration have critical implications. Because of differences in language skills, cultural assimilation, social networks, and schooling, immigrant children are often disadvantaged when compared to their native-born peers. Understanding this early life disadvantage is crucial, since it may have an impact on long-term outcomes.

## Example 2 Version A

The gap between native-born and immigrant children stems from differences in language skills, cultural integration and health outcomes. These factors may also lead to larger differences among children who arrived at older ages compared to those who immigrated at an early age. In this case, even age difference as small as 4 years, can generate differences in long-term outcomes. These differences also exist between children within the same household. This tells us that even after controlling for family inputs, external factors such as country of origin play an important role in determining adult outcomes. Potentially higher parental investment due to improved financial opportunities after immigration may still not be able to compensate for difficulties that some foreign-born individuals face in adulthood.

## Example 2 Version B

Because a significant portion of variation in children's long-term outcomes is attributed to parental characteristics, estimating the long-term effects of nativity is empirically challenging. I study the differences in schooling and labor market outcomes between U.S-born and foreign-born siblings. Analyzing siblings allows me to isolate the effect of being foreign-born on human capital outcomes, since a within-family comparison controls for all factors common to children, including parental background. Therefore, I ask whether, even after controlling for family inputs, external factors such as country of origin play an important role in determining adult outcomes of children.

# Rank the following paragraphs on a scale from 1 (best) to 3 (worst)

- A: In conclusion, it is extremely important to recognize the significance of same-sex marriage legalization and all of the potential benefits it can entail for sexual minority population. Although this paper had empirical challenges, my hope is that they will be addressed in subsequent studies, since reducing substance use among sexual minority youth has tremendous benefits for their future well-being.
- B: In sum, I detect the presence of educational disadvantage among foreign-born individuals even after controlling for family characteristics. The findings suggest the importance of country of origin and age at arrival in determining immigrants' long-term outcomes. The negative effect on schooling, however, does not generate a significant impact on labor market outcomes. Future work will be concentrated on exploring the mechanisms that can explain these findings.
- C: This proposal concentrates on 2.5 generation immigrants and attempts to identify whether differences in their educational attainment can be explained by gender as well as country of origin of their foreign-born parent. Previous literature has determined that both factors have an effect on children's schooling choices, however there is no general agreement on the direction of this effect. The main contribution of this proposal is the introduction of heterogeneity by country based on gender inequality, which will be further explored to determine how the level of gender inequality in home country interacts with gender of foreign-born parent.

# Practice

Rewrite the paragraph you ranked as “3”. Try to improve it as much as possible

# Outline of the Paper

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- Abstract
- Introduction
- Institutional/Policy background
- Model
- Data
- Methodology
- Results
- Conclusion

# Abstract



# Abstract

The 5 things a good abstract needs:

1. Introduce the topic
2. State the unknown
3. Outline the method used to answer the question
4. Preview the findings
5. Tell us what your work teaches us

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Ask yourself: Will I be happy with the actual paper?
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- A contract between you and the reader: Deliver what you promise in the introduction  
(Avoid The bait and switch)

# Outline of the Introduction 1/8

## **Motivation/Hook**

What makes a topic Y interesting?

- Y matters: When Y rises or falls, people are hurt or helped
- Y is puzzling: it defies easy explanation
- Y is controversial: some argue one thing while other say another
- Y is big (like the service sector) or common (like traffic jams)
- Avoid: “because there are other papers about Y”

## Outline of the Introduction 2/8

### **Research Question**

State your research question in the second paragraph: "This paper addresses the question" sentence



# Outline of the Introduction 3/8

## **Challenges**

Why hasn't this research question been studied?

# Outline of the Introduction 4/8

## **Model**

Key assumptions

# Outline of the Introduction 5/8

## **Data**

- Source of data
- What are your variables? How are they measured?

# Outline of the Introduction 6/8

## **Methods**

How does your methodology apply your model and how do you overcome the challenges?

# Outline of the Introduction 7/8

## **Findings**

Connect key findings to motivation

# Outline of the Introduction 8/8

## **Literature**

- Give credit to past work but also how does your paper contribute to the literature?
- How is it different than other closely related recent work?
- Avoid discussing papers irrelevant to your paper

# Body

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Write the body of the paper for a robot

- Don't try to convince the robot you are right
- State your assumptions, methods, and findings
- Be linear: If concepts are not defined, the robot breaks
- Be clear: If concepts do not make sense, the robot breaks
- Be plain: The robot does not understand fancy talk and is not impressed by it
- Be formal: The robot has no problem with mathematics as long as it is correct



# Conclusion

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- Summary: Tell the story
- Limitations
- Implications for policy
- Implications for future research

# Writing Resources

## Writing Resources (clickable links)

- [Economical Writing by Deirdre McCloskey](#)
- [Writing Tips by John H. Cochrane](#)
- [Four Steps to an Applied Micro Paper by Jesse M. Shapiro](#)
- [Good Writing Matters in Economics by Claudia Sahm](#)
- [Introduction Formula by Keith Head](#)
- [Conclusion Formula by Marc Bellemare](#)
- [Between the Introduction and the Conclusion by Marc Bellemare](#)